Cordelia’s Honor

Author's Afterword

I was asked by my publisher if I would like to contribute a preface to Cordelia's Honor. Upon reflection, I decided I'd rather write an afterword. For one thing, it was a horrifying thought that anything at all should further delay new readers from meeting my characters; secondly, discursive comments about a book make ever so much more sense after people have read it.

I'd like to thank Baen Books for this combined edition of Shards of Honor and Barrayar. Here at last in one set of covers is the whole story arc, very much as I originally conceived its shape, if not its details. As a longtime series reader, and now writer, I'm very aware of the pitfalls of what I've come to believe is another story form, as distinct from the novel as the novel is from the short story. A proper series in this sense is neither an extension of the novel (as in the multi-volume single story) nor a replication (as when essentially the same story is told over and over, cookie-cutter fashion), but another animal altogether, with its own internal demands. In addition, one must assume that readers, as I did when reading my own favorite series, will encounter the books in utterly random order. Therefore each series novel must simultaneously be a complete tale in itself, and uphold its unique place in the growing structure; it must be two books at once. The understructure must be global and timeless as well as linear and sequential. The series landscape must satisfy its readers regardless of

what direction they chance to travel through it, or how often.

I had no more idea of all this when I started writing the Vorkosigan series than I had of what my own life would be like when I started living it. A brief history of how I came to write these two books may illustrate both.

I began what was to become Shards of Honor in December of 1982. Inspired by the example of a new-writer friend, and by the economic pressures of the rust-belt Midwest town in which I was living, I set out to Write A Novel. My writing career has been on-the-job training throughout, and this was no exception; my only plan of how to structure my material was to plant an eavesdropping device in my main character's brain and follow her through her first weeks of action. This brought Cordelia and me to the end of what later became the first section of Shards. (It then had the working title of Mirrors.) I now had in hand a messy first draft of about a hundred pages of narrative, with no chapter breaks, that clearly wasn't long enough to be a novel. I paused briefly, flirted with a really bad scenario about a convenient alien invasion that would force Barrayar and Beta to ally, decided "Why should I make things easy on my characters?", and plunged on to the much better and more inherent idea of the Escobar invasion, thus accidentally discovering my first application of the rule for finding plots for character-centered novels, which is to ask "So what's the worst possible thing I can do to this guy?" And then do it.

Thus I already knew, at this early date, that Aral and Cordelia would have a physically handicapped son in Barrayar's intensely militaristic culture, though I did not yet know how it would come about. Though I was not really aware of it when I was writing Chapter One, Ensign Dubauer is clearly the first statement of this theme. I had a toddler myself at that time, and I thought of the injured ensign as a 180-pound one-year-old, and amused myself putting Aral and Cordelia through reflections of my own harried parental tribulations—which incidentally allowed them to unconsciously scope each other out as potential parents. The birth of a child is the proper climax, after all, of any romance that starts out "boy meets girl," if the romance is not falsely truncated. So I knew even then that the end of the story should be Miles's birth.

I wrote industriously through the spring and early summer of 1983. The book had now acquired the opposite problem from that of mid-winter, of being too short; it was now getting longer, but not getting any closer to the end. (I've experienced that phenomenon subsequently on other books, one of which managed to stay three chapters from the end for at least five chapters straight, so now it doesn't daunt me so much.) Since it was apparent that this really was going to be a book, and not just another false start in life, marketing considerations began to come into play. Editors' slush piles of

unsolicited manuscripts from unknowns were enormous, I was told; a thinner book had a better chance of being read first than a fat one. Besides, new characters with entire attached subplots were arriving on page 378, all demanding development at length, my internal clue that I had overshot the end and was already into the sequel, unless this was going to be a multi-volume novel as fat as a major fantasy trilogy.

The last scene I wrote back in '83 before making the decision to go back and cut it short was Cordelia's conversation with Dr. Vaagen; the introduction of Droushnakovi, Koudelka's swordstick and depression, Cordelia's first encounters with Barrayaran culture, with Padma and Alys, with the Vorhalas clan, and the soltoxin attack were already written then. I did not yet have the ideas for the war of Vordarian's Pretendership; the action-plot upon which all this good stuff then hung was much weaker, making the decision to stop easier, if still a little heartbreaking.

With much labor, and a lot of help from writer-friends, I revised and put Mirrors into proper submission format. I then went on to write the book which became The Warrior's Apprentice (which, for you fellow Dumas fans out there, I thought of for a while as Twenty Years After, though it opens seventeen years after the events of Shards). Though I hoped to develop a series, I didn't dare count on it; series books might float together, but they also can sink together, and I wanted to make sure each novel had its own lifeboat. So the each-book-independent format, which I later came to regard as a Really Good Artistic Idea, began as a mere survival plan. Mirrors came back rejected from its first submission when I was about halfway through Warrior's, with an editorial suggestion that I tighten it; I set it aside till the second book was finished, then turned my attention to one last edit, cutting altogether about 80 pages, mostly in sentence or paragraph lengths. It was a good learning experience; I've written more tightly ever since, and no, there isn't much of it I'd put back now if I could. Trust me on this one. In the late summer of '85, about the time I was finishing Ethan of Athos, Warrior's made it in over the transom at Baen Books, and I was abruptly elevated from slush-pile wannabe to real author with three completed books sold. The re-titled Shards of Honor was published in June of 1986, allowing my father to see the finished book just six weeks before he died.

Having captured a publisher at last, I went on to write Falling Free, which was serialized in Analog magazine, and won me my first Nebula Award, for best SF novel of 1988. Brothers in Arms, Borders of Infinity, and The Vor Game followed, as the ever-lively Miles proceeded to take over his surroundings as usual. About this time—summer of 1989—Philcon, a long-established science fiction convention in Philadelphia, invited me to be a writer guest. Their program-book editor asked me for a short story or outtake to donate for their program book. I hadn't

written a short story since 1986, but I thought of the soltoxin scene, reasoned that enough readers were familiar with Miles by this time to make it interesting in its own right, and took myself to my overheated attic to find the box with the old drafts. Leafing through the carbons (Shards/Mirrors was written in my old typewriter days, pre-word-processor), I was caught again by my own story, and the desire to finish it grew. It ought to be easy and quick, I reasoned; it was already a third written, after all.

Jim Baen was at first a little nonplussed to be offered a sequel to my then-least-selling novel, but we struck deals that fall for Barrayar, for a fantasy novel I'd long wanted to write, and also for a blank Miles book, contents to be announced by me later. (That one turned out to be Mirror Dance, which won my third best-novel Hugo.)

Still under the happy illusion about the "easy and quick" part (Hah. Novels never are. Never.), I started Barrayar, with the unenticing working title of Shardssequel. I wrote a new opening chapter, to reintroduce the characters and situation for new readers, cut and fit most of the old material into its new frame, and began the story again as Count Piotr argued with Cordelia and Captain Negri expired on the lawn at Vorkosigan Surleau. From that point on, the tale ran on its own legs, and turned into something I didn't expect. It turned into the book it always should have been, a real book, where plot, character, and theme all worked together to make a whole greater than the sum of the parts. It turned out to be about something, beyond itself. It's a bizarre but wonderful feeling, to arrive dead center of a target you didn't even know you were aiming for.

Shards/Barrayar, as it finally evolved, became a book about the price of becoming a parent, particularly but not exclusively a mother. Not just Aral and Cordelia, but all the other supporting couples took up and played their symphonic variations on the theme, exploring its complexities: Kou and Drou, Padma and Alys, Piotr and his dead wife, Vordarian and Serg and Kareen, and most strangely and SFnally, Bothari and the uterine replicator.

All great human deeds both consume and transform their doers. Consider an athlete, or a scientist, or an artist, or an independent business creator. In service of their goals they lay down time and energy and many other choices and pleasures; in return, they become most truly themselves. A false destiny may be spotted by the fact that it consumes without transforming, without giving back the enlarged self. Becoming a parent is one of these basic human transformational deeds. By this act, we change our fundamental relationship with the universe—if nothing else, we lose our place as the pinnacle and end-point of evolution, and become a mere link. The demands of motherhood especially consume the old self, and replace it with something new, often better and wiser, sometimes wearier or

disillusioned, or tense and terrified, certainly more self-knowing, but never the same again. Cordelia undergoes such a fearsome transformation, at the climax of Barrayar laying down everything about her old persona, even her cherished Betan principles, to bring her child to life.

Shards and Barrayar between them contain most of what I presently have to say about being a mother; it's not by chance that Barrayar was dedicated to my children, who were my teachers in learning about this part of becoming human. Further explorations on this theme will almost certainly not return to Cordelia, but take a new start-point, though Cordelia may yet have a word to say on other topics. Growing up, I have discovered over time, is rather like housework: never finished. It's not something you do once for all. Miles and his family and friends have become my vehicle for exploring identity, in what promises to be a continuing fascination. I have not come to the end of that story yet, nor will I, till I stop learning new things about what it takes to be human.